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UNHs Institute On Disability Working To Make Higher Education Accessible For All

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UNH's Institute On Disability Working To Make Higher Education Accessible For All

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DURHAM, N.H. – Thanks to a federal grant from the Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education and The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire, access to higher education in New England is improving for people with disabilities.

"Traditionally, the focus on access to education has been in K-12," says project coordinator Kirsten Behling. "Often people with disabilities leave the formal education system after high school, but we're finding an increasing number going to college, especially the community and technical colleges."

The project has two main goals: provide professional development strategies for faculty members so they have the tools they need to make their classroom and course content more accessible, and promote a universal design for learning.

"Universal design means you follow a strategy similar to that used in architecture," Behling explains. "If you have an old building, you have to modify to find ways to make it accessible, but when you build from the ground up, those accommodations are part of the original design. We want to see the same thing happen in course development."

Behling also notes that these accommodations do not only benefit people with disabilities.

"Ramps and curb cuts are also great for parents with strollers and runners, and even though closed captioning was originally created for people with hearing impairments research shows the number one use of it is by married couples when one wants to sleep while the other watches television," she said. "In the same way, no two students learn alike. If we build these strategies into course development, the theory is that it will not only help a person with disabilities, but other students with different learning styles who may not learn very well listening to a one-hour lecture."

The project is working with faculty at the New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord; the New Hampshire Technical Colleges in Manchester, Stratham and Berlin; Plymouth State University; University of Southern Maine; University of Massachusetts at Boston, Fitchburg State College and Quinsigamond Community College.

Strategies and technology currently in use include the development of a Universally Course Designed syllabus, which is a template for faculty to use to design a universal course, the use of

different technologies throughout the course (video, digital photography, audio lessons and distance learning) and versatile instructional strategies (guest speakers, alternative assessment options for all students, internships, group work.

Equity and Excellence is a project of The Institute on Disability in collaboration with The Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts in Boston and is funded completely by an \$813,358 grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. The project is in the fifth of six years.

The Institute on Disability/UCED advances policies and systems changes, promising practices, education and research that strengthen communities and ensure full access, equal opportunities, and participation for all persons. For more information, visit www.iod.unh.edu.